

# CORNSTALK—

## *King of the Rhododendron Country*

By Harold Lambert

*Ten thousand times I begged you slay no more,  
Ten thousand lies you told and cannon roar!*

—Song of Cornstalk

Cornstalk stood like a Titan among the great Indians of the 1700's.

There have been great Indian warriors and great Indian statesmen in American history. But few were past-masters both on the battlefield and before the council fires. Cornstalk, Logan, and Tecumseh were three exceptions.

Burdened with the blood of his half-white ancestry, Logan was at psychological odds with himself too often to be canonized among the Indians of West Virginia. Cornstalk was of pure Shawnee blood and was the living result of a breeding program that had extended a thousand years. And it is a matter of record that Tecumseh was great because he not only used his own talents—but also applied knowledge gained from years of study of the life of Cornstalk.

Many Indians are more famed than Chief Cornstalk because there were no writers or 18th Century model press agents to record his deeds and parlay them into the startling chronicles that have made Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Joseph, Geronimo, and Roman Nose so familiar to today's public. Cornstalk is poor television or movie material because so little is known of his life—and because he has never had the build-up. Writers who told about him were extravagant in their praise. To hear them or read their accounts, Cornstalk was little less than a bronze god.

"He was truly grand and majestic," wrote Col. Benjamin Wilson who had recently fought for his life against the Shawnee Chief.

Wilson veered near the superlative when he told of Cornstalk's appearance before Governor Dunmore and the gathered



Cornstalk—a pen sketch by the author

armies. "His voice could be heard all over the twelve-acre camp." Today it would take quite an electronic sound system to deliver an oration by our most clarion speechmakers, over such an area.

Wilson's description of Cornstalk is one of the most colorful of recorded accounts of the man. "When he arose he was in no wise confused or daunted, but spoke in a distinct and audible voice without stammering or repetition and with peculiar emphasis. His looks while addressing Lord Dunmore were truly grand and majestic; yet graceful and attractive. I have heard the first orators of Virginia, Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee, but never have I heard one whose powers of delivery surpassed those of Cornstalk on this occasion."

Cornstalk spoke before Dunmore's gathered troops as he argued for a respectable peace after the disaster at Point Pleasant, when the Shawnees were defeated in what had been the greatest Indian battle of American history.

Not too much is known of Cornstalk's appearance, since people who knew him were so overpowered with his personality that words gushed into floods of vague near-worship. Soldiers who attended the council at Charlotte said that he was taller than the Virginia officers—and they were known to have stood over six feet in height. That Cornstalk was a handsome man can hardly be doubted when we learn that women were constantly attracted to him, including the white wives of Virginia settlers. Like all Shawnees, he was of the best mould of the American Indian. The Shawnees were big Indians and they were light of color. Yet Cornstalk stood out among them in his physical splendor. During the heyday of the Shawnee raids, defending settlers were heard screaming, "Shoot for the tallest one—he may be Cornstalk!"

But he was not intended for any death on the battlefield or raiding party. He was to die at the hand of the cruelest of Virginia weapons—the white man's forked tongue.

He was possessed of a peculiar and awesome modesty. In council he always spoke on the side of peace and with a strange gift of revelation for the outcome. He constantly hinted that the red man was destined for destruction, and that the best that could be done would be to delay the inevitable and try to

find some decency and truth in dealings with the pale adversary. He was dealing with people who encroached on Shawnee lands even after their greatest leaders had promised an end to encroachments. Cornstalk reiterated the lies he was told constantly, outlining the white man's perjuries, but he never hinted at personal revenge. His was simply the cause of his people.

When challenged by a lesser man, and who wasn't, Cornstalk was blunt in both talk and action. Before the battle of Point Pleasant when a chieftain labeled him a coward because he still wanted to avoid a pitched battle, Cornstalk was calm before the council. "If you wish to fight you shall fight," he said. "And I shall see to it that you do fight!" The next day this same chief sought to retreat in the heat of battle, and Cornstalk kept his promise by driving the blade of his hatchet through the doubter's skull. Cornstalk was not capable of fear. Two men of the Confederacy tried to retreat on that day of battle and he killed them both. It was his system of maintaining immaculately brave troops against the white man.

At the age of 38, Cornstalk appeared at a peace conference between the colonial administrators at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He represented the combined Shawnees from the Ohio and Allegheny River valleys—the tribes that had been called "The Arabs of the New World." In his first recorded oratory, Cornstalk urged:

"We produce to you a certificate of the renewal of our friendship in the year 1739. Be pleased to sign it afresh that it may appear we are now admitted to your friendship, and all former crimes are buried and forgotten."

This was the voice of the "Shawnee Sachem" beginning the first vain pleas that lives be saved and that his tribesmen be guaranteed security and a chance to live in the hardwood jungles and river bottoms where they could hunt and fish and maintain their old ways.

The colonial authorities turned Cornstalk down flatly. They wanted no deal with the dread Shawnee, for these were the greatest forest-fighters who had ever lived. The authorities said they would forgive only when future behavior was a historical fact. They did not like the Shawnee tribes and made no bones about it. They would not dignify the young Cornstalk



with any kind of a treaty or promise. They treated him shabbily: all other chiefs were given presents and favors at the parley—but Cornstalk received only their cold stares.

The Shawnees went away in disgrace. Cornstalk and his talk of peace were thrust from the parley and told to be on their ways.

This was one of the most horrible mistakes that colonial professional mistake-makers could have designed. The Shawnees had no alternative but to join up with the French. They moved back along the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers and were given arms and ammunition and regarded as human beings by French commanders.

One direct result of the colonial refusal to do business with Cornstalk was the defeat of Braddock near Pittsburgh in 1755. Of the army of 850 men who easily defeated the British's 1,400 regulars, about 600 fighters were the men who had followed Cornstalk. On that one day more than 700 men died because the white settlers had not listened to the King of the Shawnees when he sought peace. No lesser man than George Washington had feared going against these red demons—although he commanded his Virginians valiantly and managed to help many of them escape the slaughter that Braddock had ordered them into. Washington fought that day so sick that he had to have a pillow on his saddle. There is no record that Cornstalk was present in this battle, but many of his lesser chieftains were seen.

During the Indian massacres of 1770, when Indian women and children were slaughtered ruthlessly in Western Virginia and Pennsylvania almost daily, Cornstalk kept begging for peace. He sent word that his tribe was sorry for these incidents—and that he wanted peace so that his men could abandon battle and go hunting for food against impending starvation, if hostilities continued. He was ignored and Governor Dunmore began gathering Virginians into a great army.

When Logan's family was murdered near Wheeling, Cornstalk again plead the cause of a cease-fire. He asked the colonialists to "stop such foolish people for like doings in the future." He added that he had gone to great trouble to restrain "the foolish people among us (Shawnees) to sit still and do no

harm . . . and shall continue to do so in hopes that the matters be settled."

But the Virginians wanted war—and they were ready to do anything to get the confederated Indians into a great battle for once and for all. The Virginians even cooked up a phoney deal with the Iroquois tribe whereby they "bought" the lands of present West Virginia south of the Kanawha. This incensed the Shawnees who felt that they owned this land—and that the Iroquois certainly had no legal right for the sale. But settlers began to swarm to Western Virginia.

Fearing any direct action against such an accomplished killer as Cornstalk, the Virginians plotted to kill one of Cornstalk's brothers to arouse the chief to do something foolish and justify Dunmore's actions of needling them toward battle. But this plot was discovered and that disaster was avoided when sympathetic whites delivered word of the scheme. Dr. John Conally, Dunmore's official spokesman, even went so far as to write a letter to a friend saying "I shall pursue every measure to offend them (the Shawnees)."

Still Cornstalk remained friendly to the British and the Virginians. Working with Chief White Eyes of the Delaware tribes, he restrained both tribes from taking up arms and murdering more white settlers. Cornstalk had one idea in this suit for peace: he wanted to save the Indians from complete destruction he knew would result from open battle. No patriot in any nation ever took more abuse than Cornstalk took from the colonials. But he was steadfast in his purpose to the end.

In his *Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*—C. Hale Sipe says the wars by the Virginians (Dunmore's) was "altogether unjustifiable war whose bitter fruits were gathered for many years." He added that it sent the Shawnees to the British in the Revolution and that hundreds of unnecessary lives were lost in Pennsylvania, Western Virginia and Kentucky when the British paid them bounties for colonial scalps. . . .

They went on the warpath in a great struggle that lasted to 1794 when General Mad Anthony Wayne defeated them at Fallen Timbers and compelled them to give up 25,000 square miles of territory north of the Ohio River. An honest treaty with Cornstalk could have saved thousands of lives.

But war was to come in 1774—and Dunmore had the army ready. In a maneuver that practically screamed "treason" to his own soldiers, he split his forces and arranged affairs so that General Andrew Lewis had to meet the Shawnees in a pitched battle.

Lewis had 1,100 troops. Cornstalk's forces were probably slightly less.

Lewis was camped at Point Pleasant. Cornstalk knew this and he headed the confederated warriors of the Delawares, Shawnees, Mingoes and Wyandots. On the night before the battle, Cornstalk made his argument for peace again. He felt that the Virginians were a superior force and that they certainly had superior equipment. Their firearms were good and they knew how to use them. Many Indians were good riflemen, but many were still too aboriginal to understand the mechanics of shooting and reloading at a rapid pace. The bow and arrow was still used in Cornstalk's ranks—and this was no instrument for this bloody day. Some of his warriors used only the tomahawk in battle.

But the chiefs insisted on battle and reminded Cornstalk of his duty to lead them. Cornstalk bowed to the inevitable and promised that he would give the white forces the fight of their lives—and that he would hold the red man's feet to the fire until the chiefs ruled otherwise.

The battle began when a pair of white hunters warned Lewis that Indians were approaching at dawn. The battle lasted a full day, and even General Lewis was awed at the skill of Cornstalk as he maneuvered the white soldiers into a triangle so that the Indian was in front and the rushing waters of the Kanawha and Ohio Rivers were behind them and retreat was impossible. Of the Virginians, 75 were dead at the end of that day and 140 were wounded. Most of the wounded died later. Indian losses were probably less (they admitted only 20 to 30 dead). But Cornstalk saw that the tide was definitely against his red fighters and he ordered a cease fire and directed his army to cross the Ohio and retreat into the plains.

In November Cornstalk entered into a peace treaty at Chillicothe, Ohio, with Dunmore's armies. Here Cornstalk boldly reiterated the stale and broken promises of the Virginians and



openly accused them of inciting the war. He spoke at length on the outrage of Logan's family.

With Cornstalk at Point Pleasant were probably the greatest all-American team of all time. Fighting at his side had been Elinipsico, Red Hawk, Scrappathus the Mingo, Chiyawee the Wyandot, Red Eagle, Blue Jacket, and Packinshenoah, the father of Tecumseh.

"Neither party could rightly claim a victory at Point Pleasant," said Drake, the foremost historian of that day. But the Shawnees dealt for peace on Dunmore's terms.

### Death of Cornstalk

The outrage and killing of Cornstalk is familiar to everyone who knows West Virginia history.

It was the prime example of the venom that is carried in the forked tongue and the man-serpent in wartime.

Following the "peace" at Chillicothe, Cornstalk remained at peace with the whites in an immaculate gesture of honesty. In the spring of 1777 when most of the Ohio tribes were going with the English, the old chief went to the Moravians in Ohio and explained that the Shawnee chiefs were lining up for the destruction of the white settlers again—that blood would flow as never before. He admitted he was powerless to stop them this time, and that the British were arming the Indians furiously as they prepared to fight the rebelling Americans.

Still in pursuit of peace, Cornstalk went to Point Pleasant in the company of young Red Hawk, a Shawnee chief, where they warned Captain Matthew Arbuckle of the imminent disaster. Cornstalk and Red Hawk were taken prisoners and held as hostages. Several days later Elinipsico, Cornstalk's son, came to visit at a time when a white soldier had been killed and scalped outside the fort. With a cry of "let us kill the red dog," a company of white soldiers under Captain Hall took over the fort. Captain Arbuckle was threatened with death if he tried to stop them.

Cornstalk was advised of the mutiny when the wife of an interpreter slipped through the garrison and warned him. But he made no move to escape. In great dignity he walked toward



the murderers and took seven bullets in his body before he fell to the floor without a groan. The other two Indians were then slain in cold blood—and without a chance to defend themselves.

Cornstalk had a premonition of his own death. On the day before his assassination he said, "When I was young and went to war, I often thought each would be my last adventure and I should return no more. I still live. Now I am in the midst of you and if you choose, you may kill me. I can die but once. It is alike for me whether it is now or hereafter."

In 1896 the white men erected a monument to the King of the Shawnees at Point Pleasant. On it is an inscription, "Cornstalk."

The mutineers who took over the fort at Point Pleasant and slew Cornstalk were casually tried and summarily acquitted in the days that were to follow. After all, Cornstalk was an Indian—and what was worse, a Shawnee. . . .

Like most chiefs of his time, Cornstalk had more than one name. Among these were "Cornstock," "Monusk," "Tannebuck," and "Keigh-tuh-quā."

The birthplace of Cornstalk is a mystery that will never be solved. As with Homer of old, many states today claim his birthplace where they wanted to claim his life when he spilled blood on the rhododendron in defense of his people. His birth has been variously put in Pennsylvania, Sciota Valley in Ohio, Kentucky, on the Little Kanawha River in West Virginia, and at Forest Hills in Summers County.

The date of his birth was probably 1720. His first recorded raid was in Rockbridge County, Virginia, where he captured several prisoners. He was active in Pontiac's War and seems to have been assigned Western Virginia as his warring ground. During the ten years he was bringing terror in the Appalachian Mountains, Cornstalk is said to have killed ten settlers for every Indian brave he sacrificed. He once took the entire Greenbrier Valley—leaving it desolate for six years—losing not a single man!

A dozen incidents of Indian cruelty in Western Virginia are accredited to Cornstalk and his raiders, but there is no docu-

mented evidence that he was actually present on any of these occasions.

Draper's papers contain many references to Cornstalk, and this coldly documented material constantly praises the chief's character—asserting openly that the white settlers were responsible for all the bloodshed laid at Cornstalk's feet.

Following the battle of Point Pleasant, when his defeated chiefs wanted to renew hostilities with Dunmore, Cornstalk quickly proposed that he would lead such a campaign on the contingent that the Shawnees kill all their women and children and fight to the death. Cornstalk undoubtedly had his tongue in his cheek, and the gathered leaders quickly demurred. "Then I shall sue for peace," the old chief retorted.

Draper calls him a "forest-born Demosthenes."